CENTER ON POVERTY and INEQUALITY
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The Census Project

BRIEF

Why the 2020 Census Matters for Rural America

DEFINING, UNDERSTANDING, AND INVESTING IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

CARA BRUMFIELD

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Census data are used to determine which areas are considered rural for the purposes of federal spending. Policymakers also use census data to make decisions about how to allocate federal funding for programs that serve rural America.
- The census helps researchers understand the characteristics and needs of rural America's population.
- The digital divide and hard-to-count areas and populations make a fair and accurate count of rural America more challenging.

The decennial census is an unmatched opportunity to capture accurate information about rural America. This information is used to determine which areas are considered rural, to inform other surveys that take a closer look at the characteristics of rural residents, and to make funding decisions for federal programs that serve those residents. All of these uses depend on a fair and accurate census that counts everyone in America once and in the right place. However, limited access to the internet, remote geographies, and significant hard-to-count populations in rural areas make the count challenging. Funders, advocacy groups, community organizations, local governments, and others can and should take steps to address these challenges ahead of the 2020 Census.

Defining and Understanding Rural America

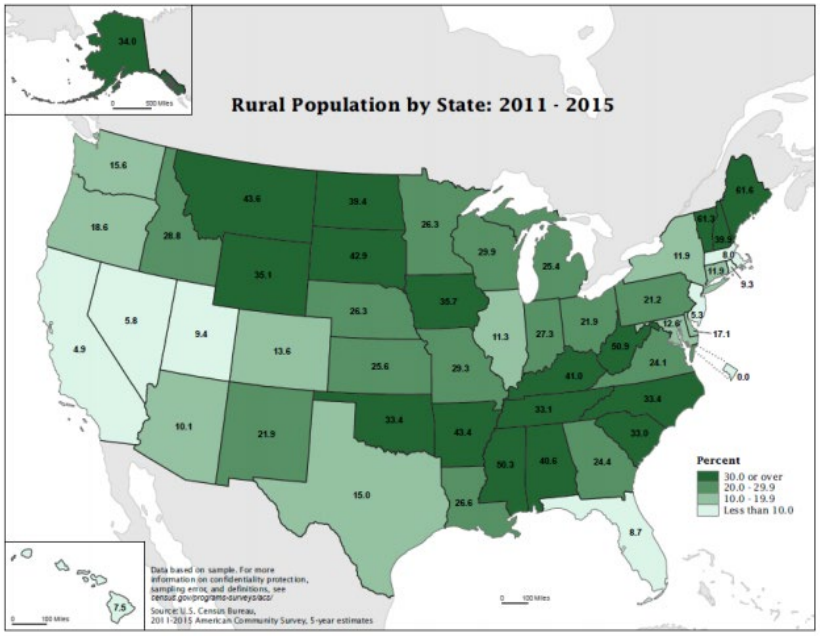
Census data help us determine which areas are rural and understand the characteristics of rural residents.

Census data help determine which areas are considered rural by federal agencies such as the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the USDA's Economic Research Service (ERS). The accuracy of such rural classifications depends on the reliability of decennial census data.

Beyond the census, a number of government surveys collect data on America's rural communities. These surveys can be more detailed and more frequent than the decennial census, and create reliable findings from much smaller sample sizes. In fact, since the 1930s, federal agencies have used sophisticated methods to estimate population characteristics based on information gathered from a relatively small percentage of total households.[1]

However, these detailed and more frequent surveys rely on the decennial census to determine who to include in surveys, to check data quality, and to translate findings to local, state, and national geographic scales. For example, the Census Bureau's American Community Survey (which continuously produces detailed socio-economic information)[2] and the Current Population Survey (which produces detailed monthly labor force statistics, among other things) [3] both rely on the decennial census in these ways.

Figure 1: The Rural Population Varies Substantially by State



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2016

Investing in Rural Communities

FEDERALLY-FUNDED PROGRAMS

Preliminary analysis indicates that over 300 federally-funded programs relied on census-derived data to

distribute around $900 billion to states and localities in FY2016.[4] Almost all of these programs provide financial assistance to America's rural areas. Of that total, nearly 60 federally-funded programs that are *exclusively* for rural America relied on census-derived data to distribute over $30 billion in FY2016.[5]

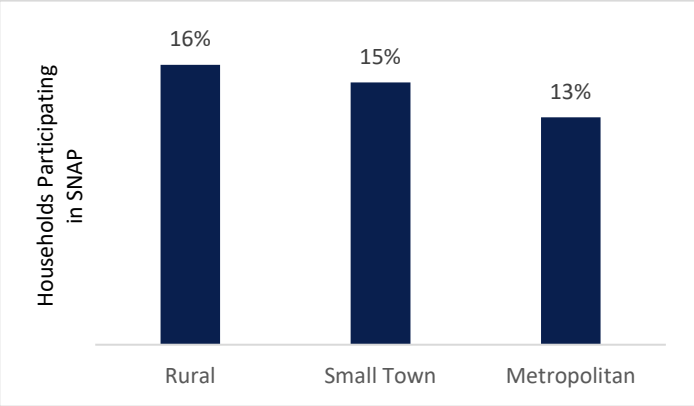
The federal government offers rural areas **four major types of funding:**

- **Grants—**funds that are used for specific purposes related to the public interest. For example, the **Formula Grants for Rural Areas** program provides financial assistance to rural areas to support the development and operation of public transit.[6]
- **Direct Loans—**funds provided to a business or individual recipient for a specific period of time, with the expectation of repayment. For example, **Rural Electrification Loans** help support rural America's electric infrastructure.[7]
- **Guaranteed/Insured loans—**federal protection for a lender against part or all of any defaults by a borrower. For example, the **USDA Business and Industry Loans Program** works with lenders to guarantee loans for rural businesses. This increases rural businesses' access to credit.[8]
- **Direct Payments—**funds paid directly to individuals or private institutions for specific uses. For example, the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)** provides food assistance to low-income individuals.[9]

There are four main ways a federal assistance program may use census data to inform the distribution of its funds:

- **Eligibility Criteria:** A program may use census-related data to define its eligibility criteria, identifying which organizations or individuals can receive funds. For instance, for several USDA assistance programs, eligible recipients must be in a rural area.
- **Allocation Formulas:** Some programs use census-related data to allocate funds among eligible recipients across the nation. For instance, the **USDA Very Low to Moderate Income Housing Loans Program** allocates direct loans among the states on the basis of each state's share of rural population, share of rural occupied substandard housing units, share of rural households with incomes of between 50 and 80 percent of area median income, and other census-related factors.[10]
- **Selection Preferences:** In some instances, programs prioritize applications for funding based on census-related data. For instance, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) **Rural Health Network Development Program** gives preference to Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) and Medically Underserved Community/Populations (MUC/MUPs). These areas are classified on the basis of census data.[11]
- **Interest Rates:** Census-related data are also used to determine interest rates for federal loan programs. USDA's **Water and Waste Disposal Systems for Rural Communities** sets interest rates on the basis of median household income data.[12]

Figure 2: SNAP Participation is Highest among Rural Households



Source: Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), 2018

CENSUS-GUIDED PROGRAMS HELP MEET RURAL AMERICA'S NEEDS

Federally-funded programs are essential to helping rural residents thrive. For example:

- **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP):** High food-insecurity counties are more likely to be rural compared to the average U.S. county.[13] While rural counties make up 63% of all counties, they represent 79% of counties with the highest rates of food insecurity. What's more, child food insecurity is more pervasive in rural areas. Nonmetro counties account for 85% of high child food-insecurity counties.[14] Research shows that participation in SNAP leads to improved food security, particularly among low-income children.[15] SNAP participation nationally (see Figure 2) was highest among households in rural

(16 percent) and small town (15 percent) counties compared to households in metro counties (13 percent).[16] SNAP also generates $1.79 in local economic activity for every SNAP dollar spent—helping to create jobs and expand markets for farmers.[17] The Current Population Survey (which relies on census data) collects SNAP program participation data that policymakers use to inform program decisions.[18]

- **Medicaid:** Nationally and in almost every state, Medicaid covers a larger share of children and families in small towns and rural areas than in large metropolitan areas.[19] In 2014-2015, Medicaid provided health coverage for 45 percent of children and 16 percent of adults in small towns and rural areas.[20] A census undercount could shrink a state's funding for Medicaid.[21] Also, the American Community Survey (which also relies on census data) collects data that are used to target Medicaid outreach to communities with large uninsured populations.[22]

Achieving an Accurate Census Count

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Census Bureau is promoting an online questionnaire as the preferred method of responding to Census 2020. However, the rural digital divide—that is, the gap in access to the internet or to reliable broadband—will make that a challenge. Without reliable internet access, some rural residents may encounter problems with the online form or choose not to participate online. Over a quarter of rural residents have no internet subscription at home.[23] Fewer than half of rural residents with less than $20,000 in household income have a broadband subscription.[24] Internet connections are often slower in rural areas, as well.[25]

HARD-TO-COUNT POPULATIONS & REGIONS

Hard-to-Count (HTC) groups and areas are those at particular risk of being missed in the census.[26] Seventy-nine percent of the HTC counties in the 2010 Census were in rural areas.[27] Rural America is also home to many people who are considered harder to enumerate for other reasons. People of color, those with low incomes, and other hard-to-count populations living in rural areas may be at increased risk of being undercounted. Residences in the most rural and remote regions, as well as hidden residences, are also more difficult to enumerate. For more information on HTC populations in rural areas, see *Counting Rural America* (georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GCPI-ESOI-Counting-Rural-America-20181010.pdf).

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR TESTS

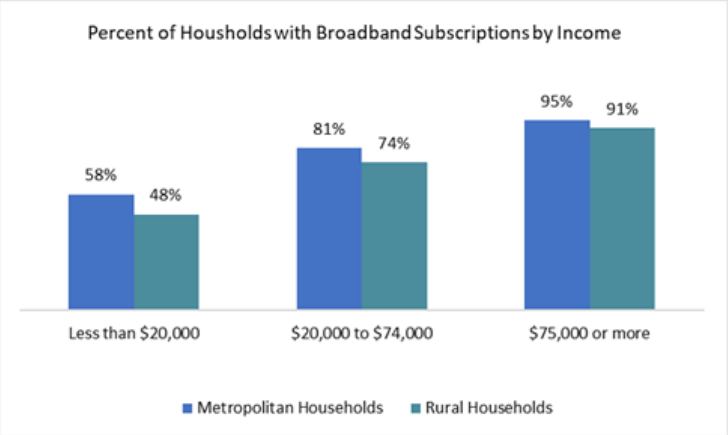
The 2018 End-to-End Test was the last chance to test 2020 operations, from start to finish, in a census-like environment. Three testing sites were planned, but the Providence County, Rhode Island site was the only one to test peak census operations.

With the exception of pre-census address canvassing, 2018 "dress rehearsals" were cancelled in the following locations:

- **Bluefield-Beckley-Oak Hill area, West Virginia:** Nearly one-third of those living in the nine rural West Virginia counties that the Census Bureau dropped from its comprehensive test lack high-quality residential broadband.[28] This site would have given the bureau insight into how rural areas with limited internet access will respond to the census.[29]
- **Pierce Co., Washington:** A suburban setting (Tacoma)[30] with a military base and American Indian reservation,[31] this site would have offered insight into how similar areas across the country might respond in 2020.

This scaled-back dry run in Rhode Island followed the cancellation of all planned 2017 site tests, which also would have evaluated plans for enumerating HTC populations in rural and remote communities, including American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) communities on tribal lands.[32]

Figure 3. Low-Income Rural Residents Have the Lowest Rates of Broadband Internet Subscription



Source: Housing Assistance Council, 2018.

Ways to Support Rural America in the 2020 Census

- **Join the Funder's Committee for Civic Participation's Funders Census Initiative (FCI 2020)**. FCI 2020 (funderscommittee.org/working-group) supports funders by providing resources and information, and by connecting foundations with peer institutions and experts.
- **Share resources and information with the organizations you fund** that work in rural areas. Ensure that these organizations know about the census and encourage them take steps to ensure an accurate count in their communities.
- **Fund organizations that can do outreach in rural America**. Organizations like 4H Clubs, local radio stations, Head Start programs, and rural health clinics can all play a role in reaching rural populations that are hard to count. Farm bureaus can also be helpful, especially when it comes to supporting better internet access in rural areas.
- **Participate in Complete Count Committees (CCCs)**, which are being established in states, localities, and on tribal lands to ensure an accurate census.[33] CCCs (census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/complete_count.html) are comprised of key stakeholders that promote census participation by leveraging knowledge of the local community.[34] Town, county, or tribally-based rural CCCs can remind leaders and local census staff of issues specific to rural areas.
- **Become a 2020 Census "partner" and help ensure that the Census Bureau's Partnership Program gets the funding it needs**. Budget shortfalls are putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates about 2020 Census operations, as well as promotional and educational materials (census.gov/partners).
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments**. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights publishes many helpful resources at civilrights.org/census. Resources from the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality can be found at georgetownpoverty.org/issues/democracy/census. The Census Project (thecensusproject.org) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration. Census Counts 2020 has a hub for census resources available at censuscounts.org. Other organizations that work to ensure a fair and accurate census include NALEO Educational Fund (naleo.org), Asian Americans Advancing Justice (advancingjustice-aajc.org), and National Congress of American Indians (ncai.org).
- **For more information about how census operations will be conducted in rural America**, see *Counting Rural America* (georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GCPI-ESOI-Counting-Rural-America-20181010.pdf).

Complete Count Committees Leverage Local Knowledge

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Expenditures of Six Rural Assistance Programs, by State, FY2016

States	% Rural Popula-tion	% Rural Rank	% Rural Land Area	Very Low to Moderate Income Housing Loans (10.410)	Rural Electrification Loans & Loan Guarantees (10.850)	Water and Waste Disposal Systems for Rural Communities (10.760)	Rural Rental Assistance Payments (10.427)	Business and Industry Loans (10.768)	Cooperative Extension Service (10.500)	Six-Program Total
Alabama	41.0%	9	95.6%	$435,108,296	$111,161,000	$23,568,371	$36,851,627	$18,597,000	$17,919,631	$643,205,925
Alaska	34.0%	14	100.0%	$112,014,712	$16,462,000	$37,246,303	$6,793,849	$19,430,000	$2,052,057	$193,998,921
Arizona	10.2%	42	98.1%	$234,385,031	$39,135,000	$5,810,000	$18,328,754	$25,695,000	$4,008,024	$327,361,809
Arkansas	43.8%	6	97.9%	$384,157,930	$21,692,000	$31,542,488	$26,379,177	$2,499,000	$12,286,135	$478,556,730
California	5.1%	50	94.7%	$512,261,295	$23,826,000	$9,305,900	$108,032,705	$35,379,000	$10,269,362	$699,074,262
Colorado	13.9%	37	98.5%	$243,896,069	$395,866,000	$4,713,000	$15,606,894	$37,691,000	$4,627,804	$702,400,767
Connecticut	12.0%	40	62.3%	$108,242,639	$0	$20,962,000	$8,724,349	$2,224,000	$2,955,944	$143,108,932
Delaware	16.7%	34	79.1%	$131,474,188	$0	$10,125,000	$8,061,135	$1,856,000	$5,396,564	$156,912,887
District of Columbia	0.0%	51	0.0%	$0	$0	$0	$0	$0	$1,330,170	$1,330,170
Florida	8.8%	45	86.2%	$608,013,181	$89,004,000	$28,117,320	$67,680,847	$102,991,000	$11,380,343	$907,186,691
Georgia	24.9%	28	91.7%	$548,932,461	$740,469,000	$45,239,000	$37,076,211	$47,457,000	$16,766,228	$1,435,939,900
Hawaii	8.1%	46	93.9%	$182,283,030	$0	$16,022,232	$10,974,656	$6,486,000	$1,782,215	$217,548,133
Idaho	29.4%	21	99.4%	$171,424,210	$0	$25,803,107	$19,218,044	$40,138,000	$3,632,748	$260,216,109
Illinois	11.5%	41	92.9%	$309,755,034	$0	$73,132,300	$29,827,867	$432,000	$12,157,605	$425,304,806
Indiana	27.6%	22	93.0%	$572,929,900	$20,732,000	$85,042,100	$22,801,371	$10,498,000	$12,108,563	$724,111,934
Iowa	36.0%	12	98.3%	$213,545,990	$80,225,000	$48,122,000	$27,775,283	$46,278,000	$10,634,540	$426,580,813
Kansas	25.8%	26	98.8%	$124,715,928	$53,818,000	$14,919,000	$13,273,592	$14,997,000	$9,829,440	$231,552,960
Kentucky	41.6%	8	96.4%	$466,716,929	$334,815,000	$40,714,000	$26,275,377	$18,064,000	$15,907,820	$902,493,126
Louisiana	26.8%	24	95.4%	$616,987,026	$0	$34,811,664	$46,649,945	$68,627,000	$10,864,490	$777,940,125
Maine	61.3%	1	98.8%	$266,728,827	$0	$29,119,000	$39,012,468	$4,880,000	$3,304,179	$343,044,474
Maryland	12.8%	38	79.4%	$444,985,128	$0	$14,431,000	$18,789,398	$430,000	$6,295,082	$484,930,608
Massachusetts	8.0%	47	61.7%	$163,310,984	$0	$11,900,863	$12,584,769	$0	$3,829,442	$191,626,058
Michigan	25.4%	27	93.6%	$667,887,608	$47,652,000	$64,744,000	$36,440,499	$31,965,000	$13,449,830	$862,138,937
Minnesota	26.7%	25	97.9%	$475,752,332	$78,631,000	$46,764,884	$22,747,230	$27,483,000	$13,627,154	$665,005,600
Mississippi	50.7%	4	97.6%	$363,885,442	$138,676,000	$46,818,559	$52,413,632	$12,248,000	$13,165,497	$627,207,130
Missouri	29.6%	20	97.0%	$586,342,341	$83,277,759	$49,054,710	$26,658,886	$46,533,000	$16,919,473	$808,786,169
Montana	44.1%	5	99.8%	$164,810,948	$15,606,000	$47,063,800	$8,409,590	$10,500,000	$5,173,200	$251,563,538
Nebraska	26.9%	23	99.3%	$99,395,630	$0	$13,545,100	$8,413,614	$31,223,000	$6,783,433	$159,360,777
Nevada	5.8%	48	99.3%	$115,519,804	$0	$20,567,589	$10,766,261	$27,990,000	$1,856,403	$176,700,057
New Hampshire	39.7%	11	92.8%	$130,616,190	$0	$10,186,418	$14,488,592	$5,000,000	$2,146,012	$162,437,212
New Jersey	5.3%	49	60.3%	$120,154,190	$0	$17,202,000	$12,184,584	$0	$4,048,850	$153,589,624
New Mexico	22.6%	30	99.3%	$46,350,437	$0	$1,942,000	$18,504,354	$14,123,000	$3,357,238	$84,277,029
New York	12.1%	39	91.3%	$214,100,490	$0	$27,407,230	$32,075,984	$18,613,000	$14,463,963	$306,660,667
North Carolina	33.9%	15	90.5%	$887,731,855	$277,600,000	$52,014,800	$87,950,922	$41,927,000	$22,579,619	$1,369,804,196
North Dakota	40.1%	10	99.7%	$50,109,952	$65,975,000	$15,339,320	$6,937,457	$18,088,000	$4,829,855	$161,279,584
Ohio	22.1%	31	89.2%	$516,562,039	$53,600,000	$53,029,500	$30,971,857	$44,707,000	$18,566,953	$717,437,349
Oklahoma	33.8%	16	98.1%	$248,818,239	$41,207,000	$36,202,125	$22,317,611	$29,400,000	$11,182,915	$389,127,890
Oregon	19.0%	33	98.9%	$376,461,086	$0	$16,551,707	$28,022,225	$86,287,000	$4,795,544	$512,117,562
Pennsylvania	21.3%	32	89.5%	$610,322,282	$18,000,000	$54,938,900	$33,889,200	$26,410,000	$17,167,885	$760,728,267
Rhode Island	9.3%	44	61.3%	$23,004,324	$0	$8,089,000	$3,569,557	$0	$1,701,595	$36,364,476
South Carolina	33.7%	17	92.1%	$506,496,548	$302,421,000	$73,616,300	$38,247,800	$47,279,000	$7,577,008	$975,637,656
South Dakota	43.4%	7	99.7%	$160,044,687	$95,109,000	$16,340,000	$16,441,467	$50,897,000	$4,783,752	$343,615,906
Tennessee	33.6%	18	93.0%	$824,129,062	$17,000,000	$35,351,979	$33,291,146	$20,642,000	$16,701,163	$947,115,350
Texas	15.3%	36	96.7%	$649,059,465	$90,480,000	$83,940,100	$59,375,232	$48,356,000	$26,246,745	$957,457,542
Utah	9.4%	43	98.9%	$371,351,996	$0	$9,048,346	$9,137,509	$23,741,000	$3,143,707	$416,422,558
Vermont	61.1%	2	98.3%	$75,986,637	$0	$18,557,004	$11,110,509	$12,000,000	$2,399,454	$120,053,604
Virginia	24.6%	29	93.3%	$587,360,809	$445,462,000	$50,954,000	$32,692,454	$46,492,000	$13,597,841	$1,176,559,104
Washington	16.0%	35	96.4%	$446,692,303	$30,782,000	$15,081,100	$35,857,764	$20,180,000	$6,812,636	$555,405,803
West Virginia	51.3%	3	97.3%	$229,696,497	$0	$29,892,248	$16,840,276	$6,340,000	$9,191,218	$291,960,239
Wisconsin	29.9%	19	96.5%	$329,658,598	$94,000,000	$57,199,095	$17,410,595	$16,942,000	$10,947,369	$526,157,657
Wyoming	35.2%	13	99.8%	$174,790,775	$0	$6,299,000	$6,091,574	$109,000	$2,224,339	$189,514,688
Totals				$16,904,961,354	$3,822,683,759	$1,588,387,462	$1,333,976,699	$1,270,124,000	$458,779,037	$25,378,912,310

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